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IRAVATHAM MAHADEVAN

Pallavas and the 'jar' Legends

The origin of the Pallavas is one of the unsolved problems in South Indian history. The view advanced in this note is based on the meaning of the term 'Palava' occuring as the name of the dynasty in its earliest extent copper plate charter.

It is beyond the scope of this brief note to review the earlier theories propounded by the historians of the Pallava dynasty to account for its origin.[1] Two observations are, however, relevant to the present discussion :—

The attempt to connect Skt., '*pallava*' ('a sprout, shoot, twig, spray, bud, blosom; Monier-Williams) with Ta., '*toṇṭai*' ('a name of several varieties of creepers including '*kōvai*', a creeper of the hedges and '*aṭoṇṭai*', the thorny caper'; D.E.D., 2880 and 2881) is linguistically unsatisfactory as these two words do not mean the same thing;

The known facts about the Pallavas,—their '*gotra*' and personal names, the language and provenance of their earlier inscriptions and the style of their administration,— strongly suggest affinities with the Deccan rather than with the Tamil country. In the present state of our knowledge it seems best to consider the Pallavas as probably one of the many feudatory families rising to power in the wake of the disintegration of the Śātavāhana empire.

The Mayidavolu plates,[2] which are the earliest of the extant copper-plate grants of the dynasty, offer an interesting and probably significant variation of the dynastic name, 'Pallava'. The record, which is in Prakrit and has been assigned to the fourth century A.D. on palaeographical grounds, was issued by the crown prince Śivaskandavarman of the Pallava dynasty ('*Palavānam*') belonging to the Bhāradvāja *gotra*.

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1. For a discussion of these theories, see (*The History of the Pallavas of Kāñci* R. Gopalan (1928), pp. 15-31; and *Kāñcīpuram in Early South Indian History*, T V. Mahalingam (1969), pp. 21-24
2. *Epigraphia Indica*, VI. p. 84

The term, 'Palava', occurs only once. The Hiradahalli plates[1] issued somewhat later by the same ruler as well as all other subsequent records of the dynasty furnish the form, 'pallava'. One may, therefore, ascribe the variant, 'Palava', to a scribal error or to the tendency in prakrit to use single consonants in the place of doubled consonants found in the corresponding Sanskrit forms. However, the unique variant form, 'palava', seems to be more meaningful than 'pallava' in the context of the mythical origin claimed by the Pallavas.

The term "*palava*" in Sanskrit means 'a basket of wicker-work (as for catching fish)' and is also attested as a personal name (Monier-Williams). It is known that the Pallavas claimed that their family 'issued out of a vessel' (*pāttra-skhalita-vṛittīnām*)[2]. They also claimed descent from Droṇa,[3] who was, according to legend,[4] generated by Bharadvāja in a 'bucket'. In fact, the sanskrit word, "*droṇa*" itself means 'a wooden vessel, bucket or trough' (Monier-Williams).

A similar legendary origin from a vessel was claimed by some other dynasties in South India. According to tradition[5], the Chalukyas were so called as the family sprang from a '*suluka*', 'a water-pot'. The Vēḷir chieftains of the Tamil country, who had marital ties with the Cheras and the Cholas and affinities with the Chalukyas and the Hoysalas, arose, according to legend,[6] from the water-pot '*taṭavu*' of a 'northern sage'. The name vishṇu-kuṇḍin (literally, 'one related to the vessel of Vishṇu') seems to imply a similar legendary origin. I have suggested elsewhere[7] that the term "*andhra*" seems to be connected with Proto-Dravidian **aṉṟ-*, the stem from which several Dravidian cognates signifying a variety of vessels are derived (*vide* D.E.D., 107, 109 and 110).

The legend of the 'jar-born' sages is indeed very ancient and is even found in the Rig-veda (VII : 33) where it is said that Vasishṭa and Agastya were gene-

1. *Epigraphia Indica*, I, p. 2
2. From the inscription on the seal of the Paḷḷankōyil Plates ed. by T. N. Subramaniyan in *The transactions of the Archaeological Society of South India* (1958-59), pp. 41-83. pl. XII
3. *Ibid.*, verse 2 of the Sanskrit portion
4. *Mahābhārata*, 1 : 130
5. *Vikramāṅkacaritra*, I : 318-8
6. *Puṟaṉāṉūṟu*, 201
7. *Dravidian Parallel in Proto-Indian Script*, Iravatham Mahadevan, *Journal of Tamil Studies* vol. II, No. 1 (April 1970), pp. 173-4

rated by Mitra and Varuṇa from a jar. Consequently Agastya was known as *kumbha-yoni kumbha-sambhava* and byother synonymous names and Vasishṭa was called Kuṇḍina ('the vessel') and his descendants came to be known as the Kauṇḍinyas. I have already referred to a very similar story in respect of Droṇa, the legendary ancestor of the Pallavas.

Two significant aspects of these 'jar' legends merit attention as they both seem to indicate that the myth has a Dravidian origin.

The myth of miraculous birth from a jar was shared by the Brāhmaṇas and the Kshatriyas, or rather by the families which were both Brāhmaṇa and Kshatriya by tradition. Vasishṭha was called Devarāj. Agastya was the reputed leader of the southern migration of the Vēḷir clan which gave rise to many southern ruling dynasties.[1] The Vēḷir chieftains seem to have had a sacerdotal origin. (It is instructive to compare O.Ta *vēḷ*: 'a chieftain' with the verb *vēḷ*: 'to sacrifice'). Droṇa, the Brāhmaṇa preceptor of the Kurus, was also the ruler of North pāñcāla, The Andhras traced their descent from the Vedic sages, as indicated by their matronymics like Vasishṭhīputra, and styled themselves "*Ēka-brāhmaṇa*" in their inscriptions. The Pallavas, and the Śālaṅkāyanas belonged to Brahmanical gotras.[2]

It is sometimes considered that the existence of the Brāhmaṇa-Kshatriya families indicated greater mobility among the "*varṇas*" in the early Indo-Aryan society. However the discovery of a pre-Aryan and probably Dravidian civilization in North-West India with some evidence for a ruling priestly oligarchy—("The general indication of a combined kingly and priestly rule fits the habit of the third "Millennium," Wheeler, 1969 : 18)—provides a new explanation for this phenomenon. It now appears likely that the Brāhmaṇa-Kshatriya or priest-ruler tradition is pre-Aryan and possibly a survival of the Proto-Indian priest rule.

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1. Naccinārkkiniyar's Commentaries on *Tolkāppiyam, Payiram*

2. "The Bhāradvāja Pallavas were not the only Brāhmaṇas who adopted the military career in those days in the Dakshiṇāpatha. There were the Gautamas, Vasishṭhas, Kaṇvas, Kauṇḍinyas, Hāritas, and this Mānavyas of the earlier epoch who intermarried with the reigning dynasty and other ruling families in the Śātavāhana period. The History of Āndhra upto the middle of the seventeenth century abounds in instances where Brāhmaṇas adopted the military career"—*A History of the Early Dynasties of Andhradesa*, B. Venkatakrishna Rao (1942), Madras.

The second aspect of the 'jar' legends worthy of notice is their special association with the Dravidian south. As we have seen, they were current among many Dravidian dynasties. The Brahmanical sages, Agastya and Vasishṭha (Devarāj/Kuṇḍina) with whom the 'jar' legends are associated, are the ones especially popular in the South Indian and Dravidian tradition. Kosambi (1970 : 82–83) goes to the extent of saying : "The seven main brahmin clan progenitors may go back to hoary Sumerian or Indus antiquity as the 'seven sages'.....The adoption of such 'jar-born' seers into the high Aryan priesthood was a fundamental innovation. By such recombination of the Aryan and autochthone, a new class of specialist developed which would eventually claim monopoly of all Aryan ritual - the brahmin caste".

The partial decipherment of the proto-Indian ('Harappan') seal-texts seems to provide a clue to the ultimate origin of the 'jar' legends. It turns out that the most frequent sign in this pictographic script is the symbol of a jar with handles or with a pronounced rim lip. It has been inferred from statistical-positional analysis that the 'jar' sign function as a suffix at the end of what are most probably names and titles on the seal texts.[1] If the further premise that the sales would mostly give the names of the ruling classes is granted, it follows that the 'jar' symbol is connected, probably through homonymy, with the priest-rulers of the civilization.[2] The preservation of the 'jar' legends in later Indian tradition and its association with priestly and royal clans[3] can now be interpreted as an important Proto-Indian survival.

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1. *The Script of Harappa and Mohenjodaro and its connection with other scripts*, G. R. Hunter (1934), P. 61. I have followed Hunter's analysis of the function of this sign, in preference to the more recent attempts by the Soviet and the Finnish scholars who regard the sign as a case-ending (the genitive).

2. I. Mahadevan, *Op. cit.* (n. 9). pp. 165-174. The suggestions made here are briefly as follows : The Dravidian masculine singular pronominal suffix-**aṉ* is homophonous with a 'vessel' word, and hence the pictogram of a 'jar' in the script probably represented the pronominal suffix added honorifically after male personal names. In due course, the honorific became a dynastic appellation and passed into Sanskrit as a loan word in the form *andhra*.

3. When the memory of the pictographic script was totally lost, its 'jar' sign associated with the priestly and the ruling classes became their symbol around which myths grew up. In a parallel development, the Dravidian honorific, homophonous with a 'vessel' word, was borrowed into Sanskrit in the *latter* sense at various periods in different translations. These words became personal or family names

I came across an interesting report of an early inscribed stone image of Vishnu apparently giving the names Palava ? and Bhāradāyi. ‡

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‡POSTSCRIPT

After I completed the paper and submitted the manuscript to the Editor, I came across a report* of an ancient inscription (c. 2nd Cent. B.C.) on a stone image of Vishṇu (or Vāsudeva) found in Malhar, Bilaspur district, Madhya Pradesh. The text in Brāhmī characters reads :

Palāva [śi] dāna Bharadāyiyā karāpita

It has been translated thus : 'gift of Palāva [śi] ; caused to be made by Bhāradāyī'. There is no discussion of the significance of the names in the report. The appearance of the personal name Palāva (Palava ?) and its juxtaposition with the apparent gotra name (Skt. Bhāradvāja) at such an early date and so far to the north are noteworthy. (*M. Venkataramanayya, 'An inscribed Vaishnava image of 2nd century B.C. from Malhar, Bilaspur district, Madhya Pradesh', *Journal of Oriental Research,* Madras, Vol. XXIX (1959–60), pp. 36–40, Pl. I to III.)

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among the ruling and the priestly classes. Words like 'Drona' 'Kundina' 'Palava' are examples of this process. I have dealt with this matter in greater detail in my paper, *Bi-lingual Parallelisms in Proto-Indian Script,* to be published later.